

Did You Know.... By Clem Dougherty

Did you know that racism played an important role in San Francisco's early history as a city? Yes, it's true. News of a gold strike in California electrified the world, and coming into the City were races and nationalities from every corner of the globe. As a result San Francisco took on an international character right from its earliest beginnings. Permeating the external veneer of the City as a melting pot was racism which divided the City into several ethnic groups. Because they were the largest ethnic group in the City, the Americans and other Anglos held up the white, Anglo Saxon, Protestant model as the ideal which the other races and nationalities were to emulate. This model contained such supposed virtues as being strong, self-reliant, noble, superior, independent, honest, upright, freedom loving, brave, and always doing the right thing. At the bottom of the heap were the Chinese, the Mexicans, the Native Americans, the Blacks, the South Americans and, because they were seen as Catholics dominated by a foreign Pope and also as ex-convicts from Australia, the Irish.

Many Italians came from South America which establishes the background for the following story, a story like all such stories with gaps to be filled in by educated guesses. Our story begins with an Italian whose name was Antonio Vescovo. He was born on July 10, 1820, in the town of Capodistria outside of Trieste in the very north east corner of Italy. (Today Capodistria is the city of Koper now a part of Slovenia.) He left Capodistria and travelled to the city of Montevideo in Uruguay (southern South America) where he met Margarite Lastreto, an Italian girl who was born in Montevideo on June 1, 1845. Antonio and Margarite married on January 16, 1860. At the time of their marriage he was 40 years old and she was 15 (not unusual for the time). We can place Antonio (but not Margarite) in San Francisco in 1852 just as the Gold Rush is peaking. But by 1860, as the Gold Panning part of the Gold Rush ends, both Antonio and Margarite are in San Francisco where both appear in the 1860 census of

the City.

What we do know is that sometime in the early 1850s, Antonio changed his name from Antonio Vescovo to Peter Wilson. The later story in the family is that Antonio admired a sea captain whose name was Wilson and changed his name to Peter Wilson in the captain's honor. But did Antonio really change his name in honor of the Captain or did he do it because of the prevailing discrimination in San Francisco against southern Europeans and South Americans - a more practical reason for changing one's name so drastically to an Anglo form and away from its Italian roots? For the rest of his life until his death on December 8, 1899, at the age of 79, Antonio would vacillate between the two names: Antonio Vescovo and Peter Wilson.



The ship "Pilgrim"

But who was this Captain Wilson? The answer may lie in the great American book –Two Years Before the Mast by Richard Dana. Dana wrote this book to catalogue his travels to California aboard the sailing ships: the Pilgrim and then the Alert during the years 1834-1836, during the Spanish/Mexican/Mission period and twelve years before the start of the Gold Rush in 1848. Dana took part in the cattle hide and tallow trade between the missions/ranchos of California and the Yankee sailing ships from

Boston/New York. In the book Dana described a well-respected sea captain named John Wilson whose ship, the Ayacucho, participated in the same hide and tallow trade. In the book Dana also described another ship: an Italian one named the La Rosa also involved in the hide and tallow trade. The fascinating connection here is that Dana met Captain Wilson again, some 24 years later, in 1860 in San Francisco. In other words Captain Wilson was in San Francisco in 1860--the very year that Antonio and Margarite appear in the City census. Was Captain John Wilson the Captain Wilson so admired by Antonio? Was Antonio involved in the hide and tallow trade in the Spanish/Mexican period prior to the Gold Rush? Was Antonio on the Ayacucho or the La Rosa? Did Antonio change his name because he wanted to disguise his Italian ancestry and pass as Anglo in a dominating Anglo culture ? Perhaps, we will never know.

Antonio and Margarite are Volunteer Clem Dougherty's great grandparents on his mother's side. The maiden name of Clem's mother was Elmyra Wilson (aka Elmyra Vescovo) born January 13, 1913 in San Francisco.

(Sources: Lochtin, Roger W.: San Francisco, 1846-1856, From Hamlet to City, pp.100-135; Dana, Jr. Richard H.: Two Years Before the Mast, Penguin Classics, Viking Penguin, Inc., 1981, pp.100-107;186;268;507-519;1852 Census of San Francisco, Schedule L;1860 Census of San Francisco, p.22; Rawls and Bean: California, An Interpretive History, 9th ed., pp. 140-156; Rice, Bullough, Orsi, The Elusive Eden, A New History of California, 3rd ed.,pp. 200-204;216-218)